

Similarities among Former Foster Children Currently Enrolled at MSSU Taelur Tatum¹

According to the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System, on September 30th, 2014 there were over 415,000 children in foster care. 64% of these children were school aged, ranging in ages between 5 and 18 (Children's Bureau, 2015). For these children, school is an unfortunate afterthought. Multiple studies show that by the time these fostered students reach high school they have, on average, a 50% graduation rate (National Working Group on Foster Care and Education [NWGFCE], 2014). When looking forward to the college graduation rates of fostered youth, this number shrinks drastically. However, the lack of college enrollment and graduation is not due to low aspirations. One study showed that over 80% of high school youths age 17 – 18 aspired to attend college, and a second study suggested that 70% of students 15 – 18 desired higher education (NWGFCE, 2014). Although the majority of students have a plan to pursue a post-secondary education, only 20% will actually enroll in a post-secondary school. In the end, roughly 3% will graduate with a bachelor's degree by the time they reach age 25 (NWGFCE, 2014). While the numbers are shockingly small, there is a small portion of foster students achieving their dreams of educational success. Why are these students beating the odds? **Research Question:** What common factors do they share, which could help indicate future foster student success?

This research was conducted through the use of an anonymous survey, emailed to all of the students currently enrolled at Missouri Southern State University. After the participants reviewed the letter of informed consent, which was approved through the university's institutional review board, they were able to voluntarily respond to the survey. Participants responded to a variety of questions, including multiple choice and short essay. The researcher compiled the multiple choice data, and reviewed the short essay responses. The researcher determined the overall tone and emotion of the response by identifying words associated with positive and negative connotations.

The researcher focused on two overarching themes: factors of educational success and foster care experiences. Both of these themes yielded common factors. While looking at the factors of educational success, all participants identified two key areas: internal traits and external support. Participants indicated that internal traits like a strong work ethic and intelligence lead them to success, while another - equal amount - of participants specified that the support of MSSU staff and significant others were the main factors of their success. In the theme of foster care experiences, 91% claimed to have formed a positive relationship with one or more foster families, even though 64% of participants lived with all non-relatives.

These findings show even when foster children are placed in a home with strangers, their foster families can have a lasting positive influence. The right foster family can encourage the internal motivation and provide the external support, which will help fostered students achieve their ultimate goal of completing higher education.

References

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